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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses factors that influence the ability of foster children to achieve academically and offers some strategies that schools can use to improve their educational success and emotional well-being. Schools can be an important source of stability for foster children, whose home lives have been disrupted. Foster children need to believe that they are welcome in school, are treated the same as their classmates, and are safe. Schools need a specific plan for enrolling and integrating foster children. The effort begins with information collection and retrieval so that children receive the services they need. Schools must plan to place foster children appropriately, taking into account social and academic needs. Both curriculum and instruction should be designed to show children that there are many different configurations of family and to be sensitive to the problems foster children face. Appropriate service delivery, teacher training and assignment, and efforts to promote parent participation are important aspects of a school's plan for dealing with foster children, who may need extra attention to build a good foundation for later life. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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SCHOOL SUPPORT FOR FOSTER FAMILIES

More than half a million children live with foster families (Noble, 1997). Predominantly children of color and residents of urban areas, they are a rapidly increasing student group. Nearly all have suffered traumatic experiences, and many have had multiple homes. Foster parents are challenged by their children's many needs and their own inadequate training, the demands of a social welfare system that enforces strict rules but allocates too little money and support, and the knowledge that the children may leave at any time. Despite all these difficulties that affect family functioning, schools must place, educate, and keep track of foster children, and also help parents promote their children's learning.

This digest discusses factors that influence the ability of foster children to achieve academically and offers some strategies that schools can employ to improve their educational success and emotional well-being.

Characteristics of Foster Families

Foster Children

Some foster children have developed survival skills and exhibit few behavior and adjustment problems. Others, perhaps the majority, manifest the effect of the neglect and abuse that characterized their past home life, grief over separation from their biological family, and the trauma of frequent placements (Ayasse, 1995; Brodkin & Coleman, 1996; Lindsay, Chadwick, Landsverk, & Pierce, 1993).

Frequent school changes force foster children to adjust repeatedly to different educational expectations, curricula, and educators. Transfers also prevent the children from bonding with their school and teachers and engaging in extracurricular activities, experiences that promote academic achievement and emotional health. They may be aggressive in relationships as a form of self-protection, be disruptive in order to get attention, and reject others because they expect to be rejected themselves. They may lie to please new parents or teachers. They may be truant, because they fear school and anticipate failure, or because their biological parents did not enforce attendance. Finally, after expending so much energy worrying about their survival, their absent families, and getting along with their foster parents, the children may not care about schoolwork and believe that failing seems inconsequential in comparison with their other problems (Ayasse, 1995; Lee, Plionis, & Luppino, 1989; Noble, 1997; Stahl, 1990).

Foster Parents

Adults choose to become foster parents for many reasons. All believe they have a great deal to give children and want to provide a good home for those who otherwise might not have one. Some may have been foster children themselves. Some may want to fill their need to be a parent; they may hope to adopt a foster child eventually. Some may simply want companionship. Some believe, probably erroneously, that foster parenting will be lucrative (Stahl, 1990).

A growing segment of foster parents, cutting across race and class, are grandparents or other relatives of children whose biological parents cannot take care of them. Frequently, relatives assume responsibility for children with little notice and no plan to become a parent. Grandparents, in particular, may worry that they have too little energy for parenting again or that they will not live until their newly-arrived children are grown. But, despite such concerns, they can thrive in their role and mitigate the negative consequences for children of moving into a new home situation (Okun, 1996).

School Practices to Support Foster Families

Schools can be an important source of stability for children with tumultuous home lives. Foster children need to believe that they are welcome in school, are treated the same as their classmates, and are safe. They require encouragement, customized delivery of a range of services, reasonable expectations to meet, and experiences of accomplishment and success. Moreover, schools need a specific plan for enrolling and integrating foster students on short notice (Noble, 1997; Stahl, 1990; Stufft, 1989).

Information Collection and Retrieval

Schools need to have complete information about foster children because, lacking this, the services these children receive are often fragmented and inadequate. To place them appropriately, and anticipate and best meet their special needs, schools may have to develop new student assessment tools and actively solicit children's records and less formal information from social service agencies and families. Keeping detailed records of new information on foster children is also important since they are likely to be transferred to another school before graduation (Lindsay et al., 1993).

Districts and schools can also work with social service agencies to develop a mechanism for maintaining a comprehensive health and education profile of foster children, which was mandated by the Federal Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1989. A model for such a computerized information database for each child in the foster care system was developed by San Diego County; called a passport, it is accessible to foster parents and relevant agencies and helps children receive needed services despite changes in family or school (Lindsay et al., 1993).

Placement

Because it is common for foster children to perform below grade level and to drop out before graduation, schools must provide educational supports that increase foster children's skills as well as their self-esteem and commitment. However, retaining foster children in grade or placing them in special education classes may diminish the sense of stabil-

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ity they gain from remaining with their class (Cormier, 1994).

Curriculum and Instruction

Foster children respond particularly well to praise, both as they begin and successfully complete a task (Cormier, 1994). Several California counties, for example, provide foster children with one-on-one-tutoring tailored to their demonstrated educational needs (Ayasse, 1995). An agency-university collaboration in Washington, D.C., provides foster children with college student mentors who promote positive attitudes toward school, work, and self through educational supports and employment training (Lee et al., 1989).

Instructional activities can recognize the many different configurations of families and show that all are equally valid, both to enhance the self-esteem of foster children and to educate other children about diversity. School libraries can acquire the growing body of literature featuring foster and adoptive families, and teachers can use the books to spur discussion. Children can be prompted to describe what they think makes a good friend, an exercise which develops loyalty and appreciation of diversity, and can end the teasing that foster children frequently experience. Because, unlike some other children, foster children may not have expensive possessions, discussing values can limit the taunting they receive (Brodkin & Coleman, 1996; Noble, 1997).

Service Delivery

Early intervention is essential to overcoming the deleterious effects of life as a foster child. To ensure that foster children are healthy and receive necessary medical treatment and psychotherapy, schools can arrange for them to visit on-site medical offices and counselors, as well as collaborate with community health clinics. In most areas, foster children are eligible for a range of special services; schools can find out about them from the government agency that oversees placement. Further, foster parents with several children and grandparents who may have limited energy can benefit from programs that free the adults temporarily from caregiving responsibilities; schools can collect and provide information about after-school, weekend, and summer activities for children (Cormier, 1994; Rothenberg, 1996).

Teacher Training and Assignment

Teachers of foster children can serve them more effectively if they are knowledgeable about the many problems the children and families face and how they may impede learning and good behavior. Teachers may need guidance in critically reviewing curriculum materials for possible insensitivities about children in nontraditional families, and in overcoming their negative feelings about children from dysfunctional families. Since some foster children act out for a variety of reasons, it is also important for teachers to be trained to handle disruptive students effectively and sensitively (Noble, 1997).

Providing teachers with full information about specific foster children, including reports about school contacts with their family, also enhances their ability to work with these students (Cormier, 1994). Placing foster children with the most experienced teachers may increase the children's chances for school success as they gain a sense of security from a confident leader and role model (Noble, 1997; Rothenberg, 1996).

Parent Participation

Usually, because foster parents know the most about all aspects of their children's lives, the parents' involvement is essential to developing a meaningful educational plan for these children (Noble, 1997; Stahl, 1990). Also, foster parents, like other parents, can be enlisted to help children learn and attend school regularly. Many, who have raised children previously, are quite adept at doing so, although some foster parents may need help in creating a home environment conducive to learning. All foster parents may need to focus on helping their children do homework, because the youth typically forget they have any. Regular contact with teachers can help ensure that parents know about student assignments (Noble, 1997; Stahl, 1990). Finally, because foster parents may feel that agencies repeatedly violate their privacy and question their competencies, educators should take care to be sensitive when eliciting information and offering suggestions (Stufft, 1989).

Conclusion

Providing foster children with the skills they need for a good job and the socioemotional competencies for a positive personal life is an especially important task for urban schools. While all children need an effective education, those in foster care, who have experienced so many difficulties so early in life, deserve the extra attention it takes to provide them with a good foundation for their adult life.

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